
The South Carolina Teaching Fellows Program: Successfully Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

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Center for Educator Recruitment,
Retention, & Advancement (CERRA)

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to highlight one of South Carolina's most successful teacher recruitment and retention programs. The Teaching Fellows Program (sometimes referred to as "the Program"), managed by the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA), is a scholarship program available to students who wish to attend college to become a public school teacher in South Carolina. Included in this report are several components related to the Program. The first section contains a description of the Program, particularly focusing on the cohort model and the roles of Campus Directors. Discussed next is the Program's success related to program completion, service in the classroom, and teacher retention. The following section of the report describes three key elements of the Program – professional development, diversity awareness, and technology in the classroom. Although the Program is committed to addressing more than three elements, these were chosen because they are the most talked about among Fellows.

Embedded throughout the report is commentary derived from two interviews conducted to obtain more in-depth information about the Teaching Fellows Program. A current Fellow (John) and a Fellows graduate who is now teaching (Jane) both agreed to share some of their experiences and perceptions related to the Program. Just before the report's conclusion, a section about why they chose the Program as a route to college is presented. In addition, results from a survey administered to all seniors in the Program are included in the report. Overall, the report provides programmatic data, survey results, and anecdotal evidence that collectively confirm the success of the Teaching Fellows Program.

Program Description

In 1999, the South Carolina General Assembly, recognizing the shortage of teachers in our state, funded the Teaching Fellows Program. The South Carolina Teaching Fellows Program is designed to recruit talented high school seniors into the teaching profession and equip them to become effective and successful educators. Each year, the Program provides fellowships for up to 175 high school seniors who have exhibited high academic achievement, a history of service to their schools and communities, and a desire to teach in South Carolina. (Note: The average SAT score for the 2010 Teaching Fellows Cohort was 1122, compared to a South Carolina average of 979 and a national average of 1017.) The number of awards granted is always contingent upon funding from the General Assembly. Students who receive a Teaching Fellows award go through a rigorous selection process, which includes an online application, an interview and presentation in front of a team of three educators, and a scored written response.

Following the rigorous selection process, applicants who are awarded a fellowship receive up to \$24,000 in scholarships (up to \$6,000 a year for four years) to attend a Teaching Fellows Institution in South Carolina. The scholarship, administered by CERRA, provides up to \$5,700 for tuition and board and \$300 for advanced enrichment programs. Additionally, Fellows are offered numerous professional development opportunities and are involved with communities and businesses through various service projects and partnerships with local schools. While completing a degree leading to teacher certification, Teaching Fellows must successfully

complete 120 credit hours and maintain a minimum GPA of 2.75 during their undergraduate careers. A Fellow agrees to teach in South Carolina one year for every year he or she receives the fellowship. Should a Fellow decide not to repay the fund through service in the classroom, he or she is obligated to repay the state through financial means.

Fellows attend college at one of 11 Teaching Fellows Institutions (TFI) in the state: Anderson University, Charleston Southern University, College of Charleston, Columbia College, Furman University, Lander University, Newberry College, South Carolina State University, the University of South Carolina - Columbia, the University of South Carolina - Upstate, and Winthrop University. These TFIs were selected based on submitted proposals which explained how their campus will support the program and described their plans to uphold the expectations set forth in the Teaching Fellows Policy Manual. A TFI must select a member of their faculty to serve as the Campus Director. This individual is responsible for planning all Teaching Fellows events, monitoring the GPA and credit hours of all Fellows, and serving as a mentor for the Fellows.

Each TFI is allowed to maintain its own unique program that meets the needs of the students on its campus. Within this program, institutions must provide: orientation sessions and activities specifically designed for Teaching Fellows before and during their freshman year; activities that will expose Fellows to the multicultural, political, social, and economic aspects of teaching; opportunities for Fellows to interact on a regular basis with leaders on the college/university campus and in the community; opportunities to work in PK-12 public schools including plans for involvement of Fellows in public school partnerships; technology education for the purpose of improving student achievement; and professional development to ensure that TFI faculty members have current information on educational trends, pedagogy, teaching standards, and student achievement standards.

In addition, the Teaching Fellows Program on any campus is tasked with enhancing the image and esteem of the teaching profession, promoting and developing innovation and reform in education, developing educational leadership, and promoting multicultural awareness and an appreciation of the state's diverse population including rural and urban populations. Each TFI is evaluated on a five-year cycle. The evaluation process includes a financial and scholastic audit; interviews with various groups on and off campus; an online survey for faculty, staff, and current and former Fellows; and a summary report submitted by the Campus Director.

Cohort Model

Teaching Fellows are placed in cohorts based on the institution they choose and the year they begin their education program. Led by a Campus Director, new and veteran cohort members regularly come together to discuss educational issues, their current practice, and to engage in professional development. Cohorts often participate in events with practicing teachers and partners with local schools, including the required student teaching internship where the practicing teachers serve as the masters and the cohort members as the apprentices. (The internship is an extended field service placement where the student gradually takes full control of a classroom for at least one semester.)

The cohort model provides a unique kind of professional learning community (PLC) where like-minded college students have the opportunity to share, learn, and grow together. PLCs are becoming more common in schools and colleges as strategies used to address student learning and growth. A PLC refers to a collegial team of teachers and administrators united by their commitment to a particular outcome. In most schools, this outcome is improving student achievement and teacher instruction. Just like the Fellows cohort, the team meets on a regular basis to share experiences, discuss teaching strategies, and solve problems. According to the Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina's website, the benefits of a PLC to educators and students include reduced isolation of teachers, better informed and committed teachers, and academic gains for students.

External research also supports the concept of a cohort of teachers working in a PLC. In 2009, researchers released two studies that examined 15 Title 1 schools to determine the impact of PLCs on student achievement and teacher instruction. They found significant gains in student achievement and improved teacher instruction in nine schools that had converted routine faculty meetings into professional learning teams that fostered a collaborative work environment (Gallimore et al., 2009; Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, the National Staff Development Council (2001) identified PLCs as the most powerful form of staff development.

The cohort model is the foundation of the Teaching Fellows Program; it is the basis of what makes the Program such a successful teacher recruitment and retention tool. In fact, this approach to learning aligns with Erik Erickson's (1982) sixth stage of psychosocial development involving young adults who have just finished their search for identity and are ready to join with others whom they view as having the same ideas, values, and interests. John, one of 490 current Teaching Fellows, shared his thoughts about the benefits of being part of a cohort. He identified his cohort membership as "a great opportunity to grow with the same group of students."

John further described his cohort of seven Fellows as "the strongest group of people I'm involved with on campus." He commented that they are involved in numerous activities on and off campus that bring them close together and help prepare them to enter the classroom. Additionally, he explained that his group not only shares the same classes, but they also share the same ideas, morals, passions, and goals. This type of connection, according to John, is extremely difficult to find on a college campus. Similar sentiments were expressed in a senior survey administered to each Teaching Fellow in his or her last year of the Program. With nearly a 100% survey response rate, approximately 90% of seniors reported that being part of a cohort was effective or very effective in preparing them for the classroom.

Campus Director

The Campus Director at each Teaching Fellows Institution who is responsible for directing and advising the cohorts is as equally imperative to the Program as are the cohorts. This individual must be genuine, non-judgmental, and empathetic as the Fellows look to him or her for guidance concerning their academic and personal lives. When asked about their duties, Campus Directors are quick to respond with a list of roles they often fulfill: mentor, advisor, friend, parent, coach, counselor, and confidant. Although each Campus Director takes an individual approach to

managing the Teaching Fellows Program on their campus, each leader must be prepared to meet the sometimes very different needs of their cohort members.

John portrayed his Campus Director as approachable and always willing to help. She has an open-door policy and facilitates the professional growth of each Fellow. Jane, a Fellows graduate who is now a practicing teacher, identified her Campus Director as a “mother away from home” who served as their leader but also knew them on a personal level. Jane also described the Teaching Fellows Program as a “family-like organization that provides a support group not only academically, but emotionally as well.” The support received from the Campus Director and other cohort members helped calm Jane’s fears and concerns as she entered a new chapter in her life. Most seniors shared the same level of respect and appreciation for their Campus Directors as over 90% reported that their leader was a Teaching Fellows advocate on campus and in public schools, and 95% indicated that the availability and support of their Campus Director was good or excellent.

Program Success

Success of the Teaching Fellows Program is based on several variables. Discussed below are the three most critical success criteria: program completion, service in the classroom, and teacher retention. When closely analyzed, data related to these variables inform CERRA and other stakeholders of the Program’s effectiveness.

Program Completion

The Teaching Fellows Program has graduated a total of 909 students from the 2000-2006 cohorts. This number results in a 74% program completion rate compared to a 55% graduation rate among all South Carolina institutions that offer teacher education programs. Jane teaches in a school with extremely high rates teacher turnover and poverty among the students. When asked to describe her first year of teaching, she humbly described it as “rough.” Although she felt prepared to work with diverse populations and new technologies, she had the urge to quit. But, with the support of her cohort members and her Campus Director, with whom she still maintains contact, and strong mentors in her school, Jane is in her fifth year of teaching and was just named District Teacher of the Year. While this award cannot be accredited to the Teaching Fellows Program alone, Jane does feel as though she is a better teacher because of the Program.

Service in the Classroom

Jane is one of 646 Teaching Fellows who completed the Program and are now working in a South Carolina public school district. Statistically, 71% of all graduated Fellows are employed in 75 school districts in the state. Another 14% are still in good standing and are temporarily deferring their teaching due to graduate school, military service, special requests, or use of their grace year. Over half of the Fellows who are currently teaching are doing so in critical need schools that meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. An absolute rating of Below Average or At Risk (unsatisfactory);

2. A teacher turnover rate for the past three years that is 20% or higher; or
3. A poverty index of 70% or higher (determined by students eligible for Medicaid or subsidized lunch).

Jane's choice to teach in one of these schools stemmed from her practicum, a field service placement prior to the student teaching internship that exposes the student to public school classrooms where he or she serves as an observer/volunteer. She was placed in an affluent school, but did not feel needed by the students. As a result, she requested that her internship placement be in a school with high levels of poverty where students often lack the fundamental tools necessary to become successful without the intervention of a passionate, competent, and committed teacher. Today, Jane teaches in a critical need school that has a teacher turnover rate of 29%, and nearly 90% of the students enrolled in this school are eligible for Medicaid or free/reduced lunch plans. John intends to move back to his hometown to teach in a rural area where he feels he would have more to offer to the students. He has more experience in this type of environment and feels as if he would be more effective working with at-risk, low income children, perhaps in a Title 1 school.

Teacher Retention

After such a difficult first year of teaching, Jane intended to pay off the loan and move on to another career. She declared that the Teaching Fellows Program did a great job preparing her for the classroom. However, the school where she accepted a teaching position supports the System for Teacher and Student Advancement (SC TAP), and Jane had not been exposed to this type of school structure. Jane asserted that much more planning was required at a SC TAP school, and she was not accustomed to all of the extra work her first year. She did, however, say that she was prepared to do the work because, as a Fellow, you are taught to "go above and beyond." When asked why she decided to stay after the first year, she simply stated, "Because I love it. It's my passion." Jane is one of 221 Fellows who have completely satisfied their loans through service and remain in the classroom.

In terms of retention, 85% of all loan-satisfied Fellows have chosen to stay in the classroom. This retention rate is extraordinary when compared to attrition among teachers in the first five years of their career. Several studies have found that as many as 50% of new teachers leave within the first five years of entry into the profession (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). These staggering numbers – whether caused by unfavorable working conditions, change in occupation, or other personal reasons – have an academic and economic impact in our schools and districts. Students lose the value of being taught by an experienced teacher, and schools and districts face the challenges of recruiting and training new hires.

The high retention rate of South Carolina's Teaching Fellows Program is fiscally advantageous to the state. In a 2007 study, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) concluded that the national cost of teacher attrition is over \$7.3 billion. The Department of Labor estimates that attrition costs the employer 30% of the exiting employee's salary. Therefore, if the average South Carolina teacher salary during the 2009 – 2010 school year was \$47,508 and 3,650 teachers (excluding retirees) left their classrooms at the end of the year, the state spent approximately \$52 million filling vacant positions. Although the estimated

costs associated with teacher turnover may differ depending on the method of calculation used, the annual loss of our teachers substantially impacts our nation and state, and most importantly, our children.

Key Elements of the Teaching Fellows Program

The Teaching Fellows Program is designed to provide students with an environment that promotes learning and growing with a group of individuals who intend to teach in South Carolina. The Teaching Fellows Policy Manual outlines a number of elements that must be included in each of the 11 programs across the state. In this report, three key elements are identified and discussed: professional development, working with diverse populations, and using technology in the classroom.

Professional Development

Teaching Fellows Institutions are obligated to maintain a cohort of Fellows who are provided diverse experiences and enrichment opportunities in their teacher education program. While each institution's approach to meeting this requirement is different, professional development is a staple among all Teaching Fellows programs in the state. During their individual interviews, both John and Jane constantly referred to the professional development opportunities they encountered as Fellows. John mentioned the many conferences he was able to attend, recounting one particular technology conference where he learned instructional strategies that he later shared with practicing teachers. He was asked to identify the most significant difference he saw between opportunities given to Fellows and other education majors; he emphatically stated, "Professional development."

Likewise, Jane referenced the continuous development of her leadership abilities. These opportunities have given her the confidence and preparation to become an effective leader in the classroom with her students and outside the classroom with her peers and other faculty. Jane said that because of these newfound leadership qualities, she has taken on more roles in the school and in the community. Similarly, senior survey results revealed comparable opinions; 92% of seniors reported that professional development opportunities were effective or very effective in preparing them for the classroom, and 93% said the Teaching Fellows experience has somewhat or to a great extent developed their leadership skills.

One particular form of professional development is time spent in the classroom. Both John and Jane maintained that one of the most helpful experiences they had as Fellows was the opportunity to be in a classroom the first semester of their freshman year. They felt that this experience gave them an advantage by exposing them to teaching even though their role was only observational at that point. John enjoyed it so much that he exceeded the required number of hours spent in the classroom during his first semester and Jane described this opportunity as the "best thing" about the Teaching Fellows Program. Both John and Jane explained how helpful it was to receive such an intense focus on the classroom from the very beginning of their training.

Diversity Awareness

Another expectation of Teaching Fellows Institutions is to promote multicultural awareness and an appreciation of the state's diverse population. Results from the senior survey showed that 89% of seniors felt better prepared to work with diverse populations – including students with special needs, students in poverty, and students who speak English as a second language – because of their Teaching Fellows experience. When asked about this topic, both John and Jane discussed their service to the community as Fellows. John mentioned several field experiences in his county that had exposed him to diverse populations, specifically his work with a government housing project where he was responsible for providing activities to children and learning exhibits for adults. Jane provided an example of working with the Hispanic population during her sophomore year. This service project, as well as the trip with her cohort to the Dominican Republic, helped prepare her to work with the three Hispanic children she now has in her classroom.

Technology in the Classroom

Teaching Fellows Institutions also are committed to preparing students to use technology in the classroom. John recalled a number of presenters and conferences that focused on instructional strategies through the use of technology. Jane felt fully prepared in terms of technology use in the classroom. She and her cohort members would engage in interactive lessons with one another using Promethean boards. Therefore, when she was responsible for her own classroom, she was already familiar with the technology. Jane was able to lead other teachers in this arena due to the experience she received as a Fellow.

A majority (63%) of Teaching Fellows seniors reported that they were better prepared to use technology in the classroom. This percentage, however, is significantly lower than the ratings assigned to other previously discussed aspects of the Teaching Fellows Program such as classroom preparation, advocacy for the teaching profession, exposure to the needs of underperforming schools, development of leadership skills, interaction with education leaders on campus, preparation to work with diverse populations, and knowledge of education policy and legislation. A few seniors went on to say that their institution provided all education majors with training on using technology in the classroom, but their experience as a Fellow did not result in additional instruction. CERRA recognizes these concerns and is working with Campus Directors to address the issue.

Why Teaching Fellows?

In the beginning of their interviews, John and Jane were asked why they chose to apply for the Teaching Fellows Program. John candidly responded, “Money.” He knew he wanted to be a teacher, but needed financial assistance to attend college. John did not know much about the Program, but made a quick decision to apply at the last minute. Jane decided to submit her application because her Teacher Cadet instructor in high school spoke highly of the Program, specifically about all of the professional development opportunities to which Fellows had access. The Teacher Cadet Program, also managed by CERRA, encourages academically talented young

people who possess exemplary interpersonal and leadership skills to consider teaching as a career. While Teaching Fellows are not required to participate in the Teacher Cadet Program, between 65% and 75% of Fellows applicants each year are Cadets. Although different motivating factors led John and Jane to the Teaching Fellows Program, the end result is the same: two highly capable students who want to teach in a South Carolina public school are able to do so.

Teaching Fellows are treated as professionals; and in return, they are held accountable and must live up to high expectations set by their Campus Director and professors. John gave a specific example related to the responsible actions and behaviors expected of him as a Fellow. He once missed a class (surely, for a very good reason), and the next time he saw the professor of that class, John was asked, “Why did you miss this class? Teaching Fellows don’t do that.” Jane also described a situation where Fellows were offered a special opportunity to interact with faculty. The Fellows in her cohort were introduced to university faculty earlier than other students as part of their orientation. This experience allowed her to connect with her professors on a personal level. Because Teaching Fellows are held to a higher set of expectations by faculty and staff, both John and Jane believe that being part of this Program distinguishes them from other education majors and practicing teachers.

As a current Teaching Fellow, John was asked what CERRA could do to improve the Program. He suggested providing more opportunities for Fellows throughout the state to come together and share experiences. CERRA recently encountered similar recommendations which resulted in the *Past, Present, and Future Conference* held in March 2010 where current Teaching Fellows and Fellows graduates spent a day collaboration. Current Fellows had the chance to attend presentations given by Fellows graduates who are practicing teachers. Keeping in mind the difficulty of scheduling activities convenient to 11 institutions across the state, CERRA will continue to work with Campus Directors to create meaningful projects for all South Carolina Teaching Fellows.

Conclusion

Interviews were wrapped up by asking John and Jane if their Teaching Fellows experience met their expectations. Both insisted that their expectations were not only met, but exceeded. Jane affirmed that the Teaching Fellows Program prepared her to be a leader in the classroom. John feels completely prepared to be an effective teacher in his own classroom next year. Unlike some new teachers, he believes that his knowledge and training as a Fellow will allow him to not only survive his first year of teaching but also to excel in the classroom. Teaching Fellows seniors also feel well-equipped; 98% of them believe they are better prepared to be a classroom teacher because of their Fellows experience, and 95% rated their overall Fellows experience as good or excellent.

The Teaching Fellows Program is not intended to fill every classroom in the state. Its purpose is to produce a small cohort of well-qualified teachers who are trained to become leaders in their schools and communities. Fellows are exposed to a series of professional development opportunities that undeniably aid in preparing them to enter their own classrooms for the first

time. As part of their service and training, Fellows also are involved in partnerships with local school districts as well as businesses that promote public education. These service projects often allow Fellows to interact with diverse populations in their area, better preparing them to teach children of different cultural backgrounds.

This Program not only recruits the best of the best, but it retains them as well. It has a proven rate of leadership, program completion, and retention. A program of this substance is essential to South Carolina due to the number of teachers who, regardless of the reasons, leave their classrooms each year and those who will be departing in the near future. Based on the ages and years of experience of the current teaching population in South Carolina, 25% of them will be eligible to retire in the next five years and 36% will be eligible to do so in ten years. These figures, coupled with an average of 5,400 teachers who do not return to their classrooms each year, suggest a continuous need for a successful recruitment and retention program. Even though the state's economic situation is uncertain and school districts' resources have been significantly reduced, South Carolina must continue to support a program that produces teachers of such high caliber.

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